

In a busy family day care environment it is sometimes easy to forget that children are capable and resourceful with the ability to contribute to their own development and learning.

Adults have great power over children as we are physically bigger and stronger and can control the resources and materials that children use. We have the power to decide what will happen, when and for how long. We also use our power to determine what is fair and what is not.

If we really believe that children are powerful and capable people then we have to let go of some of our power and have confidence and trust in children.

Why is it important to include children in the decision making process?

Children form a picture of themselves from the messages they get from other people. If others see them as competent and capable, children will come to see themselves in the same way.

Children need to have the self confidence and skills to explore, take on new challenges, test their theories about how the world works, make mistakes and discover unexpected consequences. This self confidence is more likely to occur when children are provided with an opportunity to contribute to their own experiences and learning, sharing in the decisions about what they do and how they do it.

Learning to make decisions is an important life skill. Just like any other skill it needs time and practice to master and refine. The family day care setting is a safe environment in which to rehearse.

What sort of decision making should children be involved in?

Children can be involved in decisions about:

- whether to play alone or in a group, be involved in a quiet activity or to be physically active
- which materials and experiences they will engage with; the opportunity to choose those things that interest them and match their level of competence
- what happens to them in relation to their physical care. For example, nappy changing, toileting, sleeping and eating
- whether they want to do things independently or would like some help

Consider your response if someone asks you out of the blue "what would you like to eat?" – it is an almost impossibly hard decision to make when we don't know what is available. A menu, or a list of things to choose

from, makes the decision much easier. When we are encouraging children to make decisions we need to be clear, describing the choices that are available. Be specific rather than asking broad questions such as "what would you like?"

The choices need to be genuine and offered only when we are willing to respect the child's decision. Think about the following examples:

Kien Man (6) is busy with a very complex block construction. Anne, her carer, is preparing lunch. Anne says "I can see you are very busy there, Kien Man. I am getting lunch ready because Alex (12 months old) is very hungry. Would you like to stop building and come and have lunch too? You can come back to your building afterwards. Or would you like to eat later?"



Joe (4) is walking to the park with his carer, Maria and Clare (6 months) in the stroller. As they approach a road they need to cross Maria asks, "would you like to hold my hand while we cross the road, Joe?" Joe replies, "No, I'm big now, I can cross the road myself." Maria, who is not prepared to risk Joe's safety, must now insist that Joe holds her hand to cross the road.

What strategies can be used to include children in decision making?

Carers and coordination unit staff ensure that family day care environments provide:

- adequate space and furnishings to enable children to make choices about what they do, and who they play with, whether to play alone or in a group, be involved in a quiet activity or to physically active
- places to play safely without interference or interruption and space to store works in progress so that children can return to them when they decide to
- space to store and have access to children's personal belongings
- easy access to materials allowing children to get what they need independently
- a variety of open ended resources, allowing children to choose those that interest them and match their level of competence
- materials and props to encourage and support children to make up their own games

Carers and coordination unit staff can ensure that they acknowledge children as being competent and capable. Consult with them or ask their permission before making decisions that will affect them. For example,



before changing a toddler's nappy and before packing away materials. Observe and listen to children, let them tell us what and how they want to learn, what they need to do and the

way they want to do it. Only offer children genuine choices and respect their decisions. Give children time to do things in their own way. Avoid being overprotective and encourage them to investigate and manipulate

materials at their own pace and to try new things. Remain sensitive to each child's competence and confidence and know when to offer assistance when children are attempting something unfamiliar.

When guiding children's behaviour carers and coordination unit staff are prepared to compromise when there is conflict and ask themselves if what they are asking a child to do is reasonable or necessary. They



involve children in setting the rules and in decisions about acceptable behaviour in family day care. Children should be encouraged

to use their own skills first in resolving a conflict, but carers should stay close enough to offer assistance and support the child when required. Carers can reassure children by expressing their ability to deal with conflict in positive and constructive ways.

Take a moment to reflect on your own values and practice, and consider the following:

- what do you think about involving children in decision making?
- do other carers, coordination unit staff and the families of the children in care share your values? How can you find out?
- how does the environment in your family day care setting provide genuine opportunities for children to make choices and develop independence?
- in what ways and to what extent are children allowed and encouraged to do things for themselves?
- in what situations can you provide opportunities for children to make decisions for themselves, and when is it not possible or acceptable?

Further Information

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For more information on FDCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au